FILM SYNTAX Warren Sonbert

A couple of things: I'm going to have to ask for your indulgence, in a couple of senses: rather than memorize what I was going to say, I'm going to read these notes I've put together, so what we might lose in spontaneity hopefully will be made up in certain lines, directions. Also, I will be skipping around at certain points.

This is a potential shot sequence for a film that I'm working on now. I'll list 5 or 6 shots, and describe them. Shot A is a priest in a tent at an ethnic Filipino festival, held in Dolores Park [S.F.] a couple of weeks ago. It's very dark in the middle of the frame; he's sitting down towards the back and he's eating. In the midground, in front of him, are a pair of hands, exchanging money, paying for food. So the hands themselves have a dehumanized feeling because they're detached from any figure we might see. And I think the components of this shot put forward the idea of the greed of organized religion, the Church bloated, stuffing itself, in very conventional cliched terms ~~of how one might think about religion~~.

Shot B is a sort of neutral shot: a band of gleaming light on water, moving in contrast to the preceding still shot. It's abstract: water/light. These neutral shots, of which you saw a lot in the last film [Divided Loyalties] are ~~sort of~~ like after-dinner sherbets, there to cleanse the palate before the next, more highly charged image.

The next shot, C. On the left foreground, a little girl is dressed as an angel; it's Halloween in New York. She's got a full set of wings, halo, silk white tape, the works. And she's blond. Her mother is bending over her to tie a bow around her neck. Then on the right back middleground is an old man, gnarled, pushing himself along in a wheelchair. Perhaps an alcoholic, certainly at the end of his rope. The girl is oblivious to his presence; she's looking in the other direction. She's very smug and content; there's a scowl on the old man's face. We have a series of contrasts here, all within the same frame: old/young; she just beginning life, in perfect health, protected by her mother, angel tending angel/ he's alone, isolated. At the same time, because they're in the same frame, instead of reinforcing shot A (the bogusness of organized religion), it raises the possibility, the potentiality, the spectre of miracle happening. The idea that she may cure him. He may find himself miraculously restored to his health

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and good graces.

The next shot, D. Another neutral shot. Let's reinforce the idea of serene objectivity. A burst of fireworks, let's say, a form of creation, a generative effect. Also continuing the idea of light, as opposed to the act of dissolution.

Finally in this series, let's reinforce the ambiguity, making shot E a clergyman shaking hands with some of his parishioners who are leaving church. This is again the clean image of organized religion, antiseptic, socialized, smug and efficient. Not the frenzied intention of a miracle motif. The image then can reinforce the negative qualities of shot A but at the same time strengthen the positive aspects of shot C. In other words, there's a place in religion for the mystic, impractical, unpredictable, direct, uncodified aspects. So again, the spectator takes away what he brings to it. Either complacency confirming what he feels about the drawbacks of organized religion, or an objectivity about what might be religion's hope-filled qualities. The neutral shots should reinforce this, since the figurative images have such built-in negative connotations.

Let's try another series. Shot A: a witty, urbane, solo person at an outdoor cafe sips some wine and smiles at the taste and fragrance, ambrosial, then notices something nearby, perhaps some behavior or activity at a nearby table: his expression changes to abhorrence, eventually culminating in a sneer.

Cut to B: a bridge, immense, expansive, far away. Both shots are still, but this one is very wide angle, and the other close. But all of a sudden, this bridge, several seconds in, after definitely establishing the serenity or rather placidity of the image,--there's an intense explosion and the bridge wavers, crumples, disintegrates, blows up, crashes. [~~laughter~~] Here we have two different images as far apart in content and construction as possible, and yet the psychological manifestation of A (displeasure, contempt) becomes the physical actuality of B (dissolution, disintegration). What can we do with C? Let's have a group activity of construction or planning. It could be some workmen building a house (definitely not tearing one down), or simply some people having a discussion, planning, exchanging ideas. So what are the qualifications at work here? One can look at it as if human activity is folly since all is dust eventually, --this is the negative reaction; or that despite everything one continues rolling the rock up the hill--a more beneficent view. Or, again, both--which is ideal.

The job of editing, which distinguishes film from theater or simple (minded) photography, is to balance a series of ambiguities in a tension-filled framework.

Neutral shots are usually non-figurative (4 seasons, 4 elements, implying country, landscapes, non-urban; animals can be contained within them). As soon as a human figure with its myriad of different interpretive gestures and expressions appears the image takes on a complexity denser than any image without one.

I think the films I make are, hopefully, a series of arguments, with each image, shot, a statement to be read and digested in turn. Each work as well is about a specific topic: Carriage Trade, a film I made about 10 years ago, is about travel, transportation, anthropological investigation: 4 continents, 4 organized religions, customs; about time with its 6 years in the making and cast of thousands; about how the same people age and grow and even change apartments over 6 years. Rude Awakening is about Western civilization and its work/activity ethic and the viability of performing functions and activities. Divided Loyalties, the film you just saw, is more about art vs. industry and their various crossovers. And my new product, tentatively called Noblesse Oblige, is about journalism, reportage, news events that you might see on the 6 o'clock report, how the news is created, how it might affect our lives, and journalists' responsibilities.

The great hero in film history is Brakhage, who "liberated" film. He made the tactile qualities the major concern and showed that "mistakes", errors could have an expressive, demonic, psychological function. Images could be overexposed (too bright) and underexposed (too dark). That dirt, splice lines, flare-ins and flare-outs, the dots that ends and begin a 3-minute roll of rushes, all could have a transforming purpose. He questioned the entire 19th-Century sensibility of the composed wide-angle art-gallery framework. He suggested that all budding filmmakers take an icepick to their lens to destroy Renaissance perspective. He also has ~~this almost~~ near-equivalent of Pollock--these thick overlays of impasto, almost including the paint-tube caps, with his drawing, painting, scratching on film, scraping away the emulsion, using oil, water, ink, magic marker; even, in a film called Mothlight, to go so far as to crush the wings and bodies of moths and other insects onto a strip of film. He opened

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up the use of hand-held cameras so that the personal movement of the filmmaker would be underlined, as opposed to the ~~studio,~~ commercial filmmaking industry that was superficially ~~super~~ objective and always used tracks and grids for camera movement. He and others who followed (Because, up to Brakhage, Independent New American Cinema was almost exclusively obessed with the clinical psychodrama, an offshoot of German Expressionism and its Freudian symbols that eventually became a tiresome deadend.) not only exploited the turgid, muddy images potentially to be recorded filmically, but also opened up all sorts of patterns in the camera and editing (clipped shots, frenzied progressions in which the camera could toss, fly, spin, and whirl). ¶ Brakhage's unique personal concern would also be involved in trying to discover the inner states of beings other than the adult human: children and babies, dogs, cats and insects, beings not yet born, or already dead. He proved that the images of the personal are of universal validity, and by their very nature superior to the studio-manufacted images that with rare subversive exceptions (Hitchcock and Sirk) just coddled, patted you on the back, and reconfirmed what you already knew or wanted to hear. ¶ Hitchcock, like Renoir, Ozu, Rossellini, and to a limited extent Cukor and Ford presented worlds in which everyone had their reasons, that guilt was to be shared and experienced by all--films that threatened, that shook up, that called into question existence and roles--all in their individual styles and personal inflections. Sirk, besides slyly commenting on consumerism, respectibility, bourgeois cul-de-sacs, status and community acceptance, also was perhaps the most avant-garde of commercial Hollywood filmmakers (or even non-Hollywood; his films are much more "farout" than Buñuel, or Cocteau, or Godard, or any of the other non-commercial sacred monsters) [~~laughter~~], since his primary technological obsession (through which his literary concerns would surface) was about the very two-dimensional qualities of the screen image with its interacting tensions trying to portray three-dimensional activities. Hence the purposeful flatness of his images and constant subject matter of glass, mirrors, reflective surfaces, emphasizing the formic qualities of film: his unique content considerations. Maybe it sounds simplisitc, but his people and their concerns are so shallow because their medium of conveyance is so shallow: i.e. film. And he got away with it for 20 years in Hollywood, making lots of money

for Universal, getting almost as much freedom as Hitchcock in his denunciations of capitalist mentality, and creating a very avant-garde body of work, with wit and humor, but, foremost, being concerned with film vocabulary and form, unlike any other commercial filmmaker.

If Brakhage and Sirk are the great heroes and pioneers of the Independent film and the Commercial film respectively, then Eisenstein must be the great villain of both editing and even of the film image.

In Eisenstein you can spot the good guys and bad guys a mile away. Here is nothing but a knee-jerk reflex. And to think that Hollywood silent acting has been criticized for the snarling-villain-cringing-heroine school of acting--which is nothing if not Eisensteinian. One famous example: some known political figure (who is now on the outs in Party parlance) will be shown haughtily strutting about in gold-lacquered palatial settings, arrogant and supercilious. Cut (and out of nowhere, mind you--not even to a continuing narrative strand) to a preening peacock. There are no shades, subtleties in Eisenstein, it's all black or white. No two ways to think about anything--it does all the work for you, no gradations, no surprises. Even his supposed elongation of (film) time was set in motion way before by Griffith. But really what is most damning, besides such mob pandering juxtapositions as Cossacks with pigs, is his total shirking of working with compositional spaces. It's all up front--the meaning is all contained in the foregrounds, with receding, weak, unplayed backgrounds. Now in the entire history of the cinema, from Griffith to Brakhage, it is this shifting tension, or, hopefully, tensions among the three fields of background, midground and foreground that constitute a genuine filmic sensibility. What is going on among these various planes and the spaces in between provides commentary, reflection, qualification and placement. There is this lack of density in Eisenstein, that along with Cocteau (a totally pre-cinematic sensibility), and Buñuel (stuck in an anarchronistic Dadaist groove), make them the most overrated trio in official cinema guidebook history.

Let's talk about the horizontal/vertical motion of film. Unlike poetry and art, in which is it up to the viewer, spectator, reader how much and in what way he responds to the art object (the reader can take his own time, skip ahead, dwell on words and phrases; the viewer can look at the whole painting first, or any detail), the auditor of a piece of music or the watcher of a movie is

controlled by the artist. The difference is durational. In very much the same sense as one hears a series of notes, chords, or tone clusters, one sees a progression of a series of shots. The horizontal aspect in film can be looked upon as the subject matter itself (in the narrative literary context--what are these specific images: racoons or policemen or flowers or mirrors or whatever); in the same way the horizontal dimension of literature is what happens next: events, narrative; in music the melodic line, the theme. The vertical aspect is how all this is (literally) colored, how long the shot lasts, the exposure--is it light or dark, how is the image framed, what is contained within the frame, what is left out, is the image moving or is the subject matter within the frame moving,--all this corresponds in literature to the actual words that tell the story or propel the reader: the language, the grammar, the syntax; in music, to the length and dynamics and coloration (instrumentation) of the notes. This is the old saw about Form vs. Content, which had been solved long ago: i.e., the two work together, can't have one without the other to provide the meaning(s), thrust of any work of art. Now, in music, with the 2nd Viennese School (Schoenberg, Berg, Webern) for the first time in history, with the exception of very worked-out controlled Bach fugues, both the horizontal and vertical aspects were controlled by a very systematic and totally exhaustive predefined grid or overlay or blueprint. Not only did so many notes, and of a specific kind and order, all have to be played before they were allowed to come round again (Schoenberg's contribution), but even the length of the notes or chords, their instrumentation or attack would be graphed ahead of time (Webern's contribution). Very rarely has this been attempted in film, with not only the flow of the specific images, but their qualities as form taken into consideration to provide a specific framework in approach.

So really film is basically musical: any movie with a soundtrack is already a very mixed-up medium, a hybrid, a bastardization. Of course soundtracks help carry matters along, do all the work, as it were. It's hard to think of Connor or Anger without their tracks--but that is exactly the acid test: Harry Smith's Early Abstractions and Late Superimpositions can survive without their early Beatles' goading, but Inauguration of a Pleasure Dome cannot (as witnessed by the recent pulling of the at least exotic and idiomatic Janacek Mass in favor of a very undistinguished rock track). Brakhage, Mencken, Vertov, have all shown that to purely watch the images is a much freer, broader experience than any track would add. The film can truly breathe

this way--go many more places than it can anchored to sound. Somewhere along the line the divergent rhythms of film and sound get in each other's way--unless you're concerned with film theater which is a whole other kettle of fish. You'd have to cut an image on every note, chord, or sound effect for the rhythm ~~for the rhythm~~ to be accurate to the image and then you'd have a series of redundancies, reinforcements. To object to silent film would be akin to having to have a Scriabin sonata on in the background while one would read Bernadette Mayer, ~~[laughter]~~ or being plugged into earphones while looking at a Vermeer--being told what to look at or listening to some of the early Franco-Flemish school, Joquin or Dufay. Just as ridiculous and infantile. To have to have a sound track is not taking film seriously.

Knee-reflex reactions: I remember a show here at the Cinemateque not too long ago in which a series of minimalist or structuralist films (not exactly arrivistes: Snow, Brakhage, Frampton, Sharits, Gehr) had the audience so incensed and threathened by lack of any identity figures that they would throw beer bottles at the screen. The viewing mentality was not quite ripe for these films and still has a long way to go.

One of the joys of independent/personal movies is the fact that, given a cultivated eye and form, everyone's approach is unique. In a hand-held field everyone has a distinct way of moving; it can be clipped or gliding, tentative or aggressive; how tall or short the person's stature; it can be a situation in which one is relaxed and knows the subject matter intimately or one in which you have to catch the material on the sly as it were; it can be reportage, home movie or documentary. You learn about your way of seeing by viewing your rushes: given a wide-angle to close-up lens (let's say a 12 to 120 mm. Zoom, though I'm not saying to use zooming in and out--one of the banes of modern film technology), one can frame all the gradations between ultra-objectivity (wide-angle) and selectivity (close-up). Of course, there is something inherently fascistic about the close-up--the doggedly insistent exclusion of various visual fields--but like any other gesture, used sparingly, appropriate for a given effect. One can show some hands performing a function in an early shot of a series, and then later clarify the mystery by placing it in a long shot. What is excluded from the visual field has just as much a voice as what is included. Very long takes with a minimum of visual activity automatically invoke leisure, repose, or a meditative state. Short, active, heavily spliced series of images conjur frenzy, generative, fiery forces. And overexposed image (too bright) tends to flatten the visual field, remove the apparent dimen-

sionality of the image, a bleached effect. And underexposed shot (too dark) lends mystery and a forbiding quality; murky, literally understated, even a sinister quality. Then there are the myriad varieties of movement. Is the camera still or in motion? Is the object within the frame in motion? And the camera still? Are the camera and object(s) going in complimentary or divergent directions? Again, each variation will produce a different effect on the viewer (but not to be understood divorced from the other film components). Because we are Westerners and have been trained to read from left to right any directional pull of this order will produce a progressional effect/reaction. And, oppositely, and right to left pull will register a subtle regressional attitude. Thus, one can reinforce positive or negative poles on the same level as over and under exposure. And what about the vast field of movement? Is the movement a hand-held pan in which the camera is stationary but moves on an axis in one direction or another, left to right, right to left, up to down, down to up, laterally, or in circles? Or is it tracking, by the filmmaker's own momentum, or by a moving object? This opens up more fields. Is the track conveyed by car, boat, plane, bus, train, bike, wheelchair, roller coaster, swing, being pushed out a window, and if the background medium registers this then it will cause a specific reaction/interaction in the viewer. Then there's the matter of lap dissolves (one shot fading out and another shot fading in towards the end) and superimpositions.

Film stocks: the texture of the image, the various tactile modes. Of course, color as opposed to black and white, but some stocks have a grainer look than others. And one can use indoor film outdoors (which gives a very blue tint to the image) or outdoor film indoors (with non-natural, non-available window light) which gives an orange hue to the visuals. There is slow speed flim--ASA 25--Kodachrome II--which one would use in very bright light normally: midday, on the Sahara, on water; then ASA 64, MS or tungsten, ASA 125, or Ektachrome ASA 160 (very fast film); there is even ASA 400 for color. Fuji film from Japan, Ferrania film from Italy; in black and white we have Plus X and Tri X and 4 X. ASA's from 40 to 400. One can use negative black and white as opposed to reversal, or Ektachrome commercial which has a very soft grainy almost viscous visual field; and especially fun are out-of-date stocks or film in which the emulsion (film coating) is starting

to break up so the dot-like, fiery, exploding aspect of the celluloid image is constantly in motion. One can use light leaks and flares, and camera breakdowns (the film not being properly threaded and so not quite being in the gate to give the image a fluttery momentum). All these potentials are like different brush strokes to provide a change, an expressive reversal or chasm to be plunged across.

Where the camera is placed can provide punctuation to the images. If the camera is tilted up at the objects they can be invested with stature or foreboding, larger than life, looming over one. Ford used this approach invariably, giving his heroes an exuberance they might not have had with an eye-level approach. Also, by tilting up one includes more of the natural surroundings, particularly clouds and sky (and Ford had the most poetic clouds in film history--they are almost an instrumental voice), thus emphasizing man's benign interaction with the elements and very much stressing a positive attitude towards progress, civilization, a hopeful attitude. But this is not a strict rule. When Janet Leigh goes into the car dealer's bathroom to count her recently stolen money in Hitchcock's Psycho, the camera is tilted up and the background stalls evoke a sinister, something-could-swoop-down or burst-out nagging possibility. Tilted down, the impression usually conveyed is one of Olympian detachment, eye-of-God attitude, it is all unfolding for us, this is just one cog of many, there are millions of other events like this happening all over all the time. The importance of such-and-such an activity is placed, dwarfed, commented on. This is the usual viewpoint for an establishing shot in a conventional narrative film. There is a danger in overusing a these-are-all-worms-underneath-the-rock attitude, and it is hard to think of a filmmaker who would consistently approach his subject matter this way. Then there is straight eye-level which would be the standard--Hawks hardly ever strayed from this framing. There is the whole German Expressionism school, which, as has been increasingly pointed out, was not just limited to Prussia in the 20's, but overwhelmingly influenced all of Hollywood when, because of the war, and even before, many German directors (Lang, Murnau, Preminger, Siodmak, Wilder, Lubitsch, Ulmer, Zimmermann, etc.) came over here. It was the hallmark of Welles and, to a more limited extent, Cukor and Hitchcock, and even the early psychodramas of Maya Deren, Kenneth Anger, Brakhage. A good film to check out would be Carol Reed's The Third Man, in which one is hard put to find a straight-on shot--every image seems askew, awry, tilted right to left, left to

right, up to down, down to up, so as almost to induce nausea. Usually this is meant to invoke an all's-not-quite-right-with-the-world attitude ~~[laughter]~~, as well as states of psychological disarray, frenzy, upheavel--all underlined without having to move the camera. Or one can start out in a flipped position and move the camera either 180° or 360° to complete a circle. Two classic examples spring to mind: 1) in Hitchcock's Suspicion, when Grant brings Fontaine the last poisoned glass of milk (she thinks), with a lightbulb put in the glass to really give it a luminous, highlighted quality, we see him enter from her point of view as she's in bed, and then the camera comes half circle round as he strides across the room to place the milk at her bedside. 2) Then there's a very similar take 14 years later in Nick Ray's Rebel Without a Cause, again from a character's point of view, this time James Deans', as he's stretched out, hung over, very confused about his relation to his parents, friends, the world; his father enters, dressed in a very frilly apron, to talk to him, again a 360° turnaround. Both instances show very subjectively a state of anxiety or confusion or helplessness, both unthinkable without German Expressionism, even though Ray was American, and Hitchcock British. Now point of view usually means that we are seeing images unfold distinctly through the eyes of a character (in narrative film context). Hitchcock is the arch exponent of this; he built a whole film around it, namely Rear Window, though all his works partake of it. One goes back and forth between seeing images objectively (the theater's fourth wall, as it were), and subjectively (a character's reactions to what is going on in his or her situation). It is very seductive and allows for very quick identification on the viewer's part; it is one of the hallmarks of manipulative cinema and really why film is the true 20th Century extension of Greek cathartic theater--we are made to experience very directly the upheavels that occur to the character. Of course independent, personal films, especially if they are of the lyrical, diaristic variety, can be looked on as totally point of view: what the filmmaker sees of the world and experience; or the opposite: totally non-point of view, with every image having a detached, observational quality: one is there to record without investment and not to put the audience through base paces.

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In any case there is no such thing as a correct shot--breaking rule has proved effective; the grammar exists to be undermined. So film has evolved its special language. On the lens the filmmaker has a series of f-stops which either let in or shut out light. These are like organ stops or pedals that provide tone and coloration. And there is

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arise. Very often a cut occurs before an action ~~that is in process when we first glimpse the image~~ is completed. This becomes both metaphor of frustration, hopes dashed, and yet of serenity if you like--that perhaps all of this activity has been going on, is going on, will be going on, and even all at the same time. That we are privileged viewers of many sectors of humanity, none taking ~~particular~~ precedence over the other.

I believe that the nature of film lends itself to density: one can't pack in too much, albeit with rests, breathing spaces. It isn't necessary to have the totality of resonances immediately graspable, one should be abbe to return. The works I've made have met with two seemingly contradictory reactions: either people regard them as very enjoyable, light, airy, pleasurable, everything being very giddy and beautiful; while others regard them as dark, sinsiter, hopeless, claustrophobic, negative, minor key. (And I indeed regard the works in a Mozartian key scheme: Carriage Trade being in E-flat Major, broad, epic, leisurely, maestoso; Rude Awakening in D minor, brooding, cynical, fatalistic, dancing on the precepice; Divided Loyalties in C Major, agile, dynamic, spry, with a hint of turbulence ((and even this scheme of keyes can be seen as a classical instrumental concerto: first movement setting the scene and the longest in time and investigation; the second movement a dark melancholy adagio; the third a breezy rondo to clear if not quite dispel the heavy air, gracious, with a let's-get=on-with-life feeling, a caper and a capper to what has gone before.)) So again, the ambition might be seen as an attempt to hold finely balanced series of tensions in which one can read images a variety of ways, sometimes in contradictory stances so that there are many possibilities of interaction. Not that any interpretation will do, or that it doesn't really matter what particular order presents itself,--the works are definitely about specifics, each image a statement in series of axioms and postulates to produce an argument of a flexible non-didactic kind. A plus B will produce a feeling of C, whether it is anxiety, or pleasure, or commentary, or awareness, or whatever. Usually works are mirrors of what is contained already in the viewer, and it is the role of the creator to "place" or qualify these reactions. Lead the viewer down one road only to diverge onto another, upset inbred expectations at the same time as exploiting those very cliches.

Let's take a shot analysis of some images you've just seen [in Divided Loyalties] : after a series of very short images, all bursting with motion and activity, the height of frenzy, so that the eye is both very involved, glued to the screen, and at the same time lingering to focus on something concrete and steady (these have almost all been nature materials and the camera or objects are in a variety of motions), the climax of which is a Coney Island Tilt-A-Whirl shot, a burst of revolving motion--metaphors of going in cirlces, going nowhere, aborted energy conflicting with spasms of life forces in play--the eye is highly geared now--This is followed by the first still image in some time, and the first figurative image as well,--the viewer is held now, forced and even anxious to have an anchor--so you show them something both appealing and shocking: specifically, a line-up of very handsome homosexual bodies all with shirts off, having a good time, gingerly moving even in the same right to left motion as the Tilt-A-Whirl shot; so that the shock is both on a narrative and visceral level. This is followed by a moving shot (as opposed to the still shot of albeit moving bodies) of a cemetery with the gravestones carrying over the same horizontal blocks as those preening bodies. So we get an overly obvious cliches reaction of dust unto dust, all is vanity, almost of a biblical oppression, and lest anyone think this is rabidly anti-gay (which it is) ~~[laughter]~~, this is followed by an affluent heterosexual couple at a luxurious breakfast table, very uncommunicative, obviously at loggerheads, fed up with each other and themselves, a Citizen Kane quote ~~[laughter]~~, the pettiness of their supposed just-completed argument qualified by the gravestones image (why squabble when death is just around the corner)[laughter]; this specific duo contrasts with the anonymous group of gay guys, as well as the fact that they are indoors in a domestic setting, as opposed to a public outdoor gathering-hole. So both the straights and gays come into criticism and are linked to death and dissolution; though one would never cut from one to the other, it is clear enough they are linked by the more neutral yet charged image of the cemetery. The couple at table is followed by an image (movement left to right) of a series of train pans of rather bleak apartment building exteriors (though bathed in glorious late-afternoon sun), evoking the feeling of well-what-is-going-on-behind-all-these-windows--perhaps similar scenes of alienation and estrangement (and in contrary motion to the movement strand in between the previous figurative images). This is

capped by a very short figurative image of a bocci ball game in Paris, the only part that we see is the player hitting the target, brief enough only to communicate that fact, no intro or after/effect. The camera angle, by the way, moves down continually throughout this series: the group of guys is shot from a second storey window; the couple at table, at eye level, intimately, staged (though the characters are told not to be aware of the camera); and, finally, the ball player is shot with the camera looking up. Also, the emphasis of figures moves from group to couple to individual. All of this keyed for both contrast and continuance. The brevity of the player has a playfulness and acts as punctuation almost like a period. This is followed by an almost equally brief shot of two sailboats passing each other--upside down, which conveys the obvious tinge of all's-not-quite-right, an upsetting of the normal visual stance, yet echoing the couple at table because of the two-figure emphasis (yet a contrast as well, because this set is only objects), but emphasizing the visual pun of "two ships passing in the night," unaware perhaps of the needs, desires, frustrations of one another. One fairly narrative shot, one that is specifically staged like the couple at table, can carry endlessly a narrative guideline in which to judge many of the images around it. And there is a narrative element to these works, glimpses it is true, but on an equal footing with the documentary/diaristic images.

Another set: A young man is seen in close-up, though unaware of the camera's presence, sitting cross-legged in yoga position, very happy, dumb stoned smile, watching something. Direct cut to his filed of vision, which is a band of rock performers. We go from single to group, from male to female (since the act is predominantly made up of women). And, again, the man is shot straight on, whereas the women are shot from the right. They are out there to please, and apparently they are doing so, judging from the all-embracing approval given them by the onlooker. Now, as a visual icon, a viewer carries with it a proxy of the viewing audience--looking at itself as in a mirror, although how much this resonates depends on the actual self-reflective qualitites of the cinema viewer. From the group of women performers we cut back to the solitary young man, eyes now closed in what seems to be ecstatic reveries, underlining a particularly non-reflective state, perhaps an avoidance of reality as his stoned demeanor might indicate. Then a cut to a very castles-in-Spain image, specifically, a sailboat on a very smooth, reflective lake, with a tower-castle on the right very much in balance with the sailboat on the left, though the figures are contrasted, one moving, the other anchored. Since we have cut from a person with eyes

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closed, to this castles-in-the-sky image, we underline the element of wish-fulfillment; this is the removed from reality image the young man would seemingly like to conjur up, which is, of course, the primary base emotion of the typical cinema audience trying to step outside reality, to have dreams bestowed on them. So how can we provoke guilt, recrimination for this shirking of responsibility. The lake-castle-sail-boat image is followed by a shot of another young man, standing as opposed to sitting, who is bleeding profusely from the head, dazed, not by drugs but from some dire car accident (as will be confirmed later on by a doctor running to attend him). So perhaps that removed-from-reality image is present in both their consciousnesses, but from very different circumstances. This not only qualifies the young man's fleeing from reality, stuffing himself on pleasure, but it also qualifies and upsets the cinema audience's demand for a good time from movies; there is somehow a link, a chain, by the very act of editing, of putting shots/images next to one another, that says our pleasure is somehow at the expense of another's suffering. ~~(Of course, the reaction on the audience's side is dependent on a lot of self-cognisance and the ability to digest and assimilate fairly rapid images, to contain and place them, standing on the outside as it were.)~~ This is emphasized by the next image after the dazed, bleeding man,--which is a close-up of a Cezanne painting being cleaned. The image of art naturally refers back to the artist-filmmaker, saying that art is both objective and merciless, the filmmaker being both callous and opportunistic, sharing in the guilt, taking advantage just as much as the audience of other people's misfortune to build his argument. There is a coolness, an objectivity that seems almost cruel and ruthless, to follow this image of human suffering by an image of, very specifically, art going about its own business, as oblivious as the drugged young man and the audience wanting to be entertained. Engaged in an activity of casual everyday banality, though the response might be different if one recognizes that this work is not being painted, only cleaned, the dirt being stripped away. The metaphor would then allude (without lessening the guilt shared among the drugged young man, the cinema audience, and the artsy filmmaker) to the young man's closed eyes, but would focus on the process of reopening, of lifting the veils of obscurence. Here again we can have our cake and eat it...Yes the artist is cool and detached,

a word? (BW)

reasoning? (BW)

but the reason is to shake up and disturb. So the argument is not so much an original work of art being composed, but the fact that art is being revealed, in the causal link of images. This is followed by a shot of a photographer (again, a stand-in for the filmmaker) in a crowd, New York Easter Sunday, with about 40 different still cameras around his neck, desperately turning around and around looking for something to film, shoot, contain within the lying objectivity of still photography in which just an instant is recorded. This image is a criticism of a whole art form, the fact that nothing has a valid reality outside of the whole chain of images, which is what cinema is; so this image of non-artist (funny enough in itself) becomes just another underlining of the responsibility of the artist, and viewer, ~~and man himself.~~

~~(The image of the man going around in circles, dazed in a different way than the two men who have preceeded him, can't see the forest for the trees...Art is all around him, desperate to be recorded, but he is oblivious, as much as the young man with shut eyes in an anchored position.~~

* * *

Sonbert: Criticisms, or questions? ~~I knew you'd be the first, Barry.[laughter]~~

Barrett Watten: ~~If you throw that one out, you're going to have to watch what~~ happens. [laughter]

One of the things you left out about Eisenstein, is the social context in which the artist operates. To really simplify matters: Eisenstein was addressing a largely non-discriminate and mainly illiterate mass of people, and so the obviousness of his use of film as an educational medium has to be taken into account. And so if he's using a fairly stock set of images to demonstrate a political point, that's operating across a much bigger gap than the kind of film you're proposing, which, in fact, works off an incredible sophistication and work of the film industry over the last 50 years. Your entire vocabulary presupposes a real intimacy with what American Hollywood film and personal film has been. And that leaves the question of what language is and the assignation of values within the film as exterior to the film, in a way.

One thing that just came up was the woman cleaning the Cezanne, okay? And then there's a great take on what art was, etcetera. Now it wasn't clear to me what she was doing, although I did get the sense of coldness, and the art industry, and what she looked like, and what this thing was, and how it was mounted and so forth. Now there's an articulation from your viewpoint that goes even farther than what I can see in the frame. It has to do with reading into the act of making this work of art that is correlated with a tremendous amount of other art. And that's exactly what Eisenstein didn't have available to him. What he did have, basically, was Cubism, a kind of simultaneity which he was then extending into a medium which he was more or less creating as he went along.

Sonbert: In the same time that Eisenstein was making those propogandistic narrative films, Vertov was making a whole other body of work, also directing himself to the masses, also under the control of Soviet party policy. And he opened up an incredible amount of poetry and ambiguity in his images. If you compare "Man With A Movie Camera" to any of Eisenstein's flim's of the 20's, it's much broader, looser, air is con-

stantly being let in to his images. And they're not shoving you into thinking one way or another. I think Eisenstein suffered because he was dealing in narrative, with characters, how to present them as being good or bad. And Vertov was more in a documentary frame, so that automatically everyone was given a certain stature, which Eisenstein could not do, because he was anchored to narrative.

Watten: I don't think you can just throw out Eisenstein ~~as being the villain~~ without considering whether he was completely in control of the irony that his reduction of the signification of film,--in other words, does he know what he is doing? Does he show us what there is to see? And the condition of history that Eisenstein was dealing with was one that was inescapable, while Vertov's position was one of ambiguity and distance, and may not be the way one might want to look at a period like that.

[[Eisenstein's literalism is highly ironic. Like that figure of the little kid on the throne in the Winter Palace seems to me like the figure for the ability of the filmmaker to do whatever he wants, which is an incredibly libidinal image, you've got this sexuality which just cannot be gotten away from. (And the image of the 14 year old with the shaved head sitting on the Emperor's chair. That's like Eisenstein's ability to do something to you.) As an artist he was completely aware of what his activity was. It was working within a State structure. You're not talking about extrinsic and intrinsic ideas when you're talking about Eisenstein and Vertov.]]

Think out! try to add to

Sonbert: Eisenstein almost invariably had the camera down, tilted up, full face, full in the frame, with very diffuse backgrounds. They all seem to melt away. Whereas Vertov placed his people within specific contexts; you get an idea of environment, of spaciousness in his very images that you don't get in Eisenstein's, which are much more controlled, but more claustrophobic, to me. I'm not making Eisenstein out to be, like, a total non-talent. [laughter]

Watten: Eisenstein identified with power, and so his irony is of a different order than that of somebody who's bucking power.

Sonbert: Okay, it's great that he identified with power, but I don't have to identify with him because of that.

Ron Silliman: I kept getting the impression from your talking about your work of an assumption of a standard of literacy. Like, this shot will create these responses. And I find that when I see your work I go through a process of needing to identify the image before I can read it.

And that varies. If I recognize Anne Waldman in the backseat of a car, then I have to recognize her before I can then proceed to look at it. If it's just a woman in the backseat of a car I can begin to read that image a lot quicker. I'm not always sure at what level I'm immediately expected on your part, for example, to recognize Anne Waldman, recognize Nicky and Jerry (who I assume a larger number of people might not recognize), and there was one scene where people were hitting one another with sacks, where one of the people was somebody I knew from my job, who I assume you might not even recognize. [laughter] So how does that impact with what the shot is going to be? You're assuming a fairly high and consistent standard of literacy, which is a little like defining your audience in advance.

Sonbert: No, I don't feel that. If you get the added embellishments, the overlays, that's fine, they can add to it, maybe change inflections. But usually it's pretty low base level standard of what information one can grasp. It's not necessary to recognize that's Anne Waldman, flanked by Douglas Dunn and Larry Fagin, as it turns out. It's enough that three people, grumpy, hung-over from the night before, not really talking to one another, are in the back seat.

[Unidentified]: Watching your film and hearing you talk about it, I think there are like two different processes maybe dealing with the two hemispheres of the brain. When you're watching the film you're only dealing with the sensual qualities of the film. You don't really have the time to think about the narrative in the way that you talked about it. It seems like the narrative is very important to you because you spent a lot of time talking about ~~the film in terms of its narrative~~ 'it', rather than ~~its~~ color or form. But is it humanly possible for us to deal with the narrative and the sensual qualities at the same time?

Sonbert: There are certain things you feel, react to, register right off. Even here today, there was a huge amount of audience response, laughter, to an image which generally has not gotten that much reaction. Specifically, the man holding this trophy, which somehow falls out of his hands. This is contained within a very specific series of shots. Which is that a woman comes out of what looks like a theater, she's taking bows. So we get the feeling of applause, fame, acknowledgement, celebrity. This followed by a shot of this bridge being raised. A sort of physical manifestation of bestowing honor. Then we see a shot of a rainbow. Again, the visual pun: the pot of gold at the end of the silver lining of the rainbow, which we've just seen, which drops away.

Now, I don't know if people got all these lines, but I think they had a sort of intuition. I'm not forcing,--I would never show,--Kubelka has this policy when he makes films of always showing them twice. I'm not that didactic. If you want to come back to it again, that's fine. And I think that when you do, more things open up. more connections, lines, reactions. But hopefully, the works can function on many levels. And sometimes people just feel this thrill about going along, being shoved along every moment. That's basic one level. Then maybe later they can come back and have more happen for them.

[Unidentified]: The question that I have is: does what you call the intuitive response to the narrative come from the information within the frame or the relationship between frames?

Sonbert: It's both.

[Unidentified]: My feeling is that, in seeing it, it's more the information within the frame than the relationship, right now, on the first viewing.

Melissa Riley: Can you talk about how you compose, when you go out with your camera?

Sonbert: Right...

Lyn Hejinian: That leads back to the question of literacy, too. In other words, are you reading, in the editing room? Do you have an initial, naive possibility? [laughs] Or do you go out and look for someone to drop a trophy? [laughter]

Sonbert: There are a few images where I went out, almost after it was set, because I felt I needed more dark, turbulent, sinister images. Specifically the woman floating at night in the swimming pool. I almost wanted to have a death, murder, evoke that. Usually I'll go out and shoot what interests me, attracts me. Usually it's public display, festivals, energy, activity, people concerned with precision and control.

When I get back rushes, I'll see a series of images and I think, that's the one that's really working for me. But I won't as yet--until I gather so many rolls of film over so many years. Like, this was three years. Then I'll think, okay, I've got enough. Then I'll start to build these art works.

Kathleen Frumkin: That opera sequence, that first woman dressed in black, bowing she stumbles, and there's a pun on the trophy dropping. But I began to recognize the costumes as from Aida. And then further on there's a shot of neon from the Aida Cafe. So what interested me in that was how much you carry around via memory. Or actually that the world

speaks to you in its chronic images. I don't mean chronic in a bad way, but something that is consciously on your mind. So that seems to be a very literal thing, and not necessarily narrative.

Bob Perelman: What happens is, as you see the film more, your time sense dilates. You know what's going to happen, so you don't have this initial moment of worry and you can read the finer points. The film really seems to get longer. The first time it whooshes by.

Something like that happens in poetry. I was over at Intersection when Ron read part of Tjanting, which I find extremely easy to listen to. It seems like he's being very deliberate, and not demanding pyrotechnics from the audience to keep up. But then I heard somebody behind me say, Yeah, I didn't get much of that, I just closed my eyes and got some images.

So, the language that you have in common with the viewer is under dispute at every point. And, finally, the only thing you can do is to go on your own familiarity. You've seen this stuff for three years in making it. So you'll just have to take a stand: Yes, this guy is hung-over; Anne Waldman is in the backseat and not talking, and that's what it is. The question of resolving the language, the time scale and the fineness of the language, finally has to end up in the artist and then: here it is for people to see as many times as they want.

no correct reading that one gets with a light meter--there is only the standard mean and it is up to the filmmaker to decide what will be appropriate. Of course, all this is dependent on development, what one's lab will do to it. You never know how it's going to look until it comes back from the lab. But there is a certain amount of insurance you can provide (albeit of the fairly expensive kind), which is to overshot, or make a series of takes where each time you film the same object you vary the exposure, one or two stops up or down. And one can extend this even further by also varying still shots with moving shots, going left to right and right to left, tilting up or down and so on: then, while editing you decide what you'll need.

A few words about the length of images. One of the banes of TV is that people can superficially "read" the content of images fairly quickly; the information can fly by pretty rapidly so that the viewer is able to get the selling point on immediate contact. Slow films (Ozu) drive people up the wall. Now, given a certain standard mean of what is long and what is short, one can modulate series of shots of varying length that, as a group, might all be deemed fast. But there is a world of possibilities between shots that last as long as 20 seconds, those as short as ¼ of a second, and all the gradations between. People are a lot more sophisticated than 50 years ago as far as what they can take in. Now the question indeed arises as to how much one can take in when an image goes by fairly rapidly: the figurative characters within the frame and their possible interactions both in and out of the frame; the taking into account of the off-screen space; their reactions, gestures, expressions, clothes, make-up, class, sensitivity; what are the byplays between characters and filmmaker: are they strangers, friends; are they aware they are being filmed or taken by surprise; is it day or night, city or country; what is the active focal length: close up, midshot, wide-angle; is the camera moving, which way; is the object in motion; what is the exposure like, or camera angle; which element takes precedence, both in reading a shot and making the leap to the next image; how do we both tie them together or be made aware of their differences. Is the point similarity or variety? And one can latch onto a key or grid, but that may dissolve, be upset. Some people are distrubed by the brevity of some of my images--particularly those that one might label "beautiful" or "ecstatic." They are over before one has a chance to barely luxuriate in them, they are taken away before one can nestle and coo and cuddle in the velveteen sheen [~~laughter~~] of it all, so that feelings of deprivation, expectations dissolved, even sado-masochism